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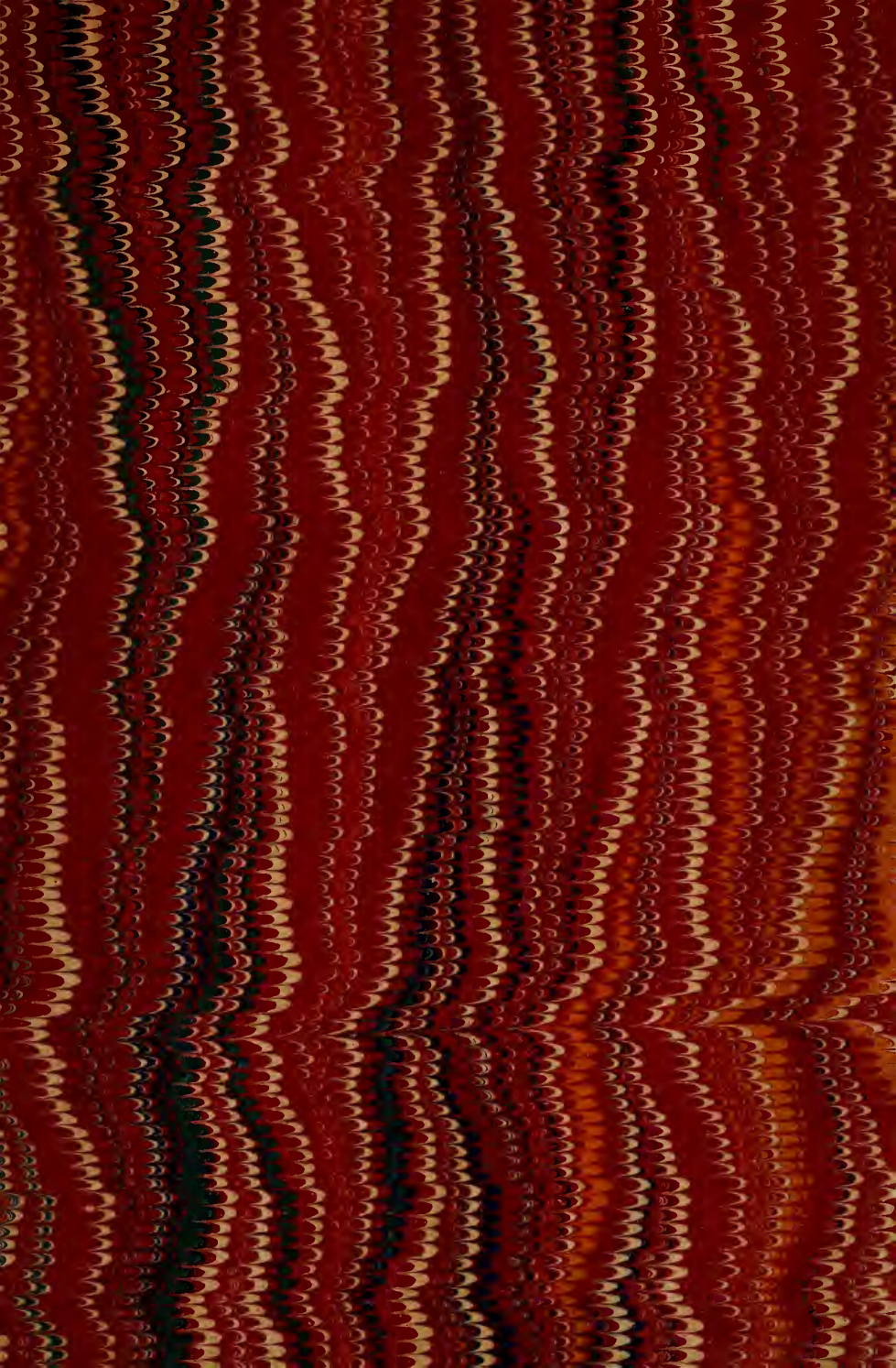
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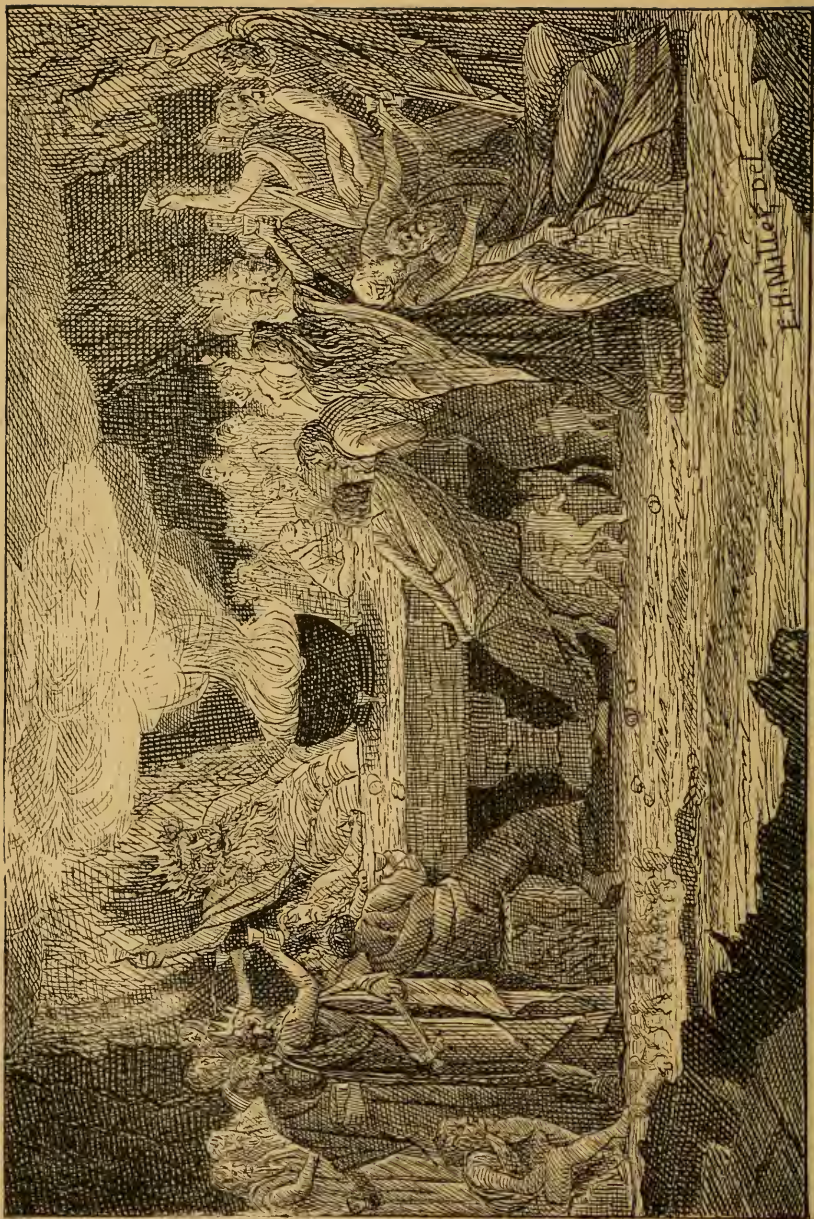
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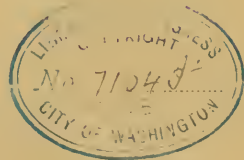
THE
SPECTRAL FEAST;

BY

MRS. H. N. RALSTON,

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

By E. H. MILLER.



WASHINGTON, D. C.

1878.

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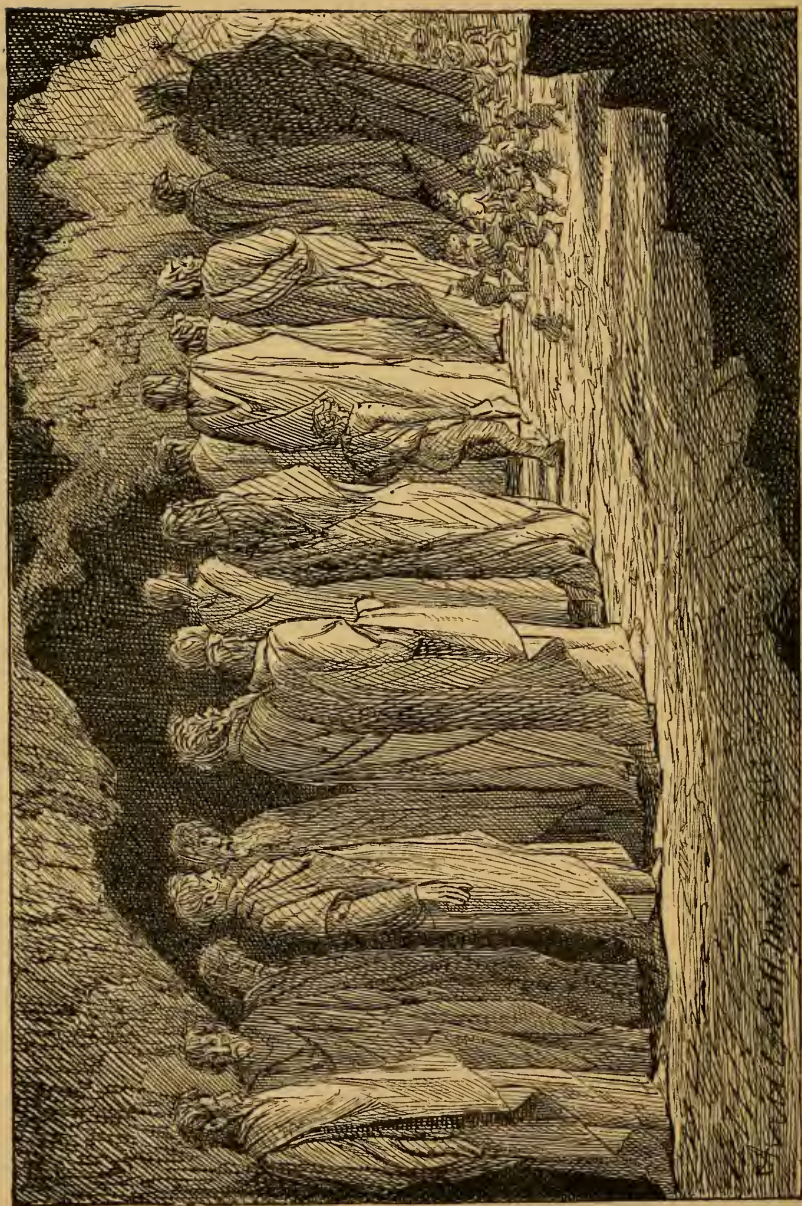
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THE SPECTRAL FEAST.



THE scene was wild—in caverns dread
And peopled with the spectred dead
A feast was set—lost souls of men
Forever passed from mortal ken
Were bid to come—the Ghoul this night
Would greet again with fierce delight
Each old-time friend—the wine should flow
As at the feasts of Long Ago.

And thus they came from East and West,
From North and South, each phantom guest.
A wierd procession moved they all
In silence to the banquet-hall,
While lurid light from flashing bowl
Revealed each ghostly Human Soul.
No priceless ransom now could save
The weak, the strong, the young, the brave!

“Most welcome subjects,” spake the King,
“I would that you memorials bring
Of by-gone scenes at festive board,
Of such you all have precious hoard,

Let recollection then have sway,
To wing the fleeting hours away,
So, while amid the shadows dim
We quaff the wine from beaker's brim,
We'll drink one toast to Memory,
And hold again high revelry!"

Thus the Spectre of Manhood made answer then,
"The sands of Life's years number threescore and ten,
An ingrate, I squandered this heavenly boon,
I emptied the hour-glass ere yet 'twas high noon!
Dark visions upon my lost spirit now crowd,
The jeers of the mocking—the scorn of the proud,
The taunt of the Fiend who pursued me and hurled
Me from Honor's high place—accursed of the world!
The Fiend of the wine-cup—on souls doth it feed,
Of blood doth it drink in its horrible greed,
It stealeth the coin to the penniless thrown,
It laughs at his tatters—it curses his groan,
It blackens the whiteness of Youth's fairest page,
It clutcheth the prop from bent, tottering age,
It thrusteth 'neath vestments of purple its sting,
It plucketh out jewels that girdle a king,
It drowns the sad wail of the penitent's prayer
In breakers that roll o'er the gulf of Despair.
I come, O Destroyer, at thy fell behest
To drink of the lees from life's full vintage prest,
Full oft have I joyed in the wine's ruddy flow,
But now do I curse thee mid dungeons of Woe!"





A shadowy casket Ambition then brought,
By Wisdom's hand fashioned—in beauty enwrought,
Ambition had borne it 'mid loudest acclaim
To place it where beckoned the finger of Fame!
A casket once bound by the claspings of Truth,
And filled with the Hopes and Endeavors of Youth,
Where jewels of Thought had with knowledge combined,
And tendrils of Faith had around it entwined,
This casket of Genius so wondrous, so rare,
No sceptre in lustre might with it compare,
Now, only its semblance Ambition could bring
While thus the grim Spectre spake unto the King:

“Alas! can one fetter the pinions of Thought,
Or blot out the record that Ruin has wrought,
Or treasures from stores of Remembrance unfold,
Decayed by the rust and destroyed by the mold,
Consumed in the fierceness of Passion's wild fire,
Or ground in the depths of Pollution's foul mire,
Or lost in the black, seething waters that flow
And writhe as they sink in the maelstrom of Woe?
My casket is empty—its shadow I bring
Of all hast thou robbed me, Insatiate King!”

The Spectre of Power, once awful of mien,
Now bidden as guest to this banqueting scene,
Spake thus to the King, “Lo! the annals of Fate
Are blazoned with arms and device of my State,
My banners streamed out in their glory afar,
And princes were bound to my conquering car.

Where morning's bright sun gilded sands of the East
I spread to my courtiers a right-royal feast,
And brilliants that shone on my glittering crest
Had flashed in their splendor from thrones of the West.
But destruction came swift—thy captains are bold,
They entered as victors within my stronghold,
They felled my firm gates—my citadel gained,
My diadem seized—and my proud soul enchained.
With beakers yet filled from the flagons of wine,
A vassal was I, and my kingdom—'twas thine!
Thy cohorts, O Tyrant, subdue to each zone,
And wine is the Demon that guardeth thy throne,
The vulture that swoops from a rose-tinted sky,
The dragon that slays with its basilisk eye,
The monster that rages,—tho' seen from afar
It wrecks where it guides, 'tis Perdition's red star!
I wander dethroned, yet my curses shall ring
Forever, throughout these dread caverns, O King!

A pale form of Childhood appeared as a guest,
Like one that a mother had clasped to her breast,
Had stilled its low plaints with her lullaby song
Ere mingling her voice with the angelic throng.
Ah! quickly the Spirit of Evil then sped
To cast his foul net over Infancy's bed,
He bent o'er the sleeper, oh, horror! to trace
Sin's hideous impress upon that young face,
To stain that pure tablet, white, even as snow,
And blight the May roses just ready to blow!









A flush o'er the brow of the fierce monarch came,
Was it glow of the wine, or tingle of shame?
For he cried in his wrath, "Away! hence! away!
I'll none of thy pipings—not here shalt thou stay,
Thou camest unbidden—Avaunt with thy woe!
Wan Shadow of Childhood,—Forevermore, Go!"

The Phantom of Pleasure then turned to the King,
So haggard a spectre! so ghastly a thing!
Her tresses thro' which the warm sunbeams had played,
And carelessly toying Love's fingers had strayed,
She clutched, in the frenzy of maddened despair,

And cried in her ravings, half-curses, half-prayer,
"Abandoned of earth, and of Heaven denied,
Condemned my lost soul in perdition to hide,
Accursed of all mortals—unshriven by priest,
Yet men once proclaimed me the Queen of the Feast!
They waited my bidding—bowed low at my shrine,
And poets sang thus in their numbers divine:

We hail thee, O Queen of the Feast,
As Goddess whom mortals adore,
We bring thee rare gems from the East
And to thee libations outpour.

Too dull, and too poor in their worth
Are pigments of limner to trace
Those charms with which at thy birth
The Graces illumined thy face.

Thou camest to dazzle our sight
From heights where divinities dwell.
O stay thy mysterious flight,
Still charm by thy magical spell.

Pale Luna, with luminous train
Moves on thro' etherial space,
Thou treadest Love's royal domain
With step of imperial grace.

From measureless depths of the Blue,
Some wandering, radiant star
Shines out in effulgence anew
As thy dreamful eyelids unbar.



An alchemy subtle may steep
The breezes of Spring in the vale,
While thou the sweet secret dost keep
Of perfume, thy red lips exhale.

Aurora, with roses fresh blown
Loops back the thick folds of the sky,
Till the Monarch of Day on his throne
In splendor of glory sweeps by.

And poets her graces divine
Shall sing thro' the ages that roll,
But we, to thy beauty in wine
Will pledge, as we garland the bowl.

'Twas thus till the morning grew broad in the East,
They rendered me homage as Queen of the Feast.
Through fumes of the wine-cup I saw not the glare,
Or form of the serpent there coiled to ensnare,
Until from the sting of its poisonous fangs
I tasted of death, yea, its bitterest pangs!
Though shrunken and blasted, False Tempter, I swear,
This soul could it fly from these realms of Despair
Would shout to the nations, "Look not lest ye die,
Look not on the wine-cup, for death lurketh nigh!
O Mortals! that Tempter why will ye not flee?
That Serpent that stingeth, Foul Tyrant, 'tis Thee!"

Lo! then the dread Demon in fury arose
With a gleam in his eye like to furnace that glows,

And the swift, whirling clouds of his fiery breath
Like the Simoon's hot blast on his mission of death.
He spake, and the cavernous echoes awoke,
As if amid mountains the thunders had broke.
Back shrunk the pale spectres in direst affright,
Back, back to the darkness and chambers of night.

“Ye minions,” thus thundered the King,
“Your curses no longer shall ring,
I summoned my slaves, not my foes?
I heed not your wailings, your woes;
I am strong, yea, Lord of the Will,
My purposes, dread I fulfill,
I yield not for Pity's sweet sake,
I reck not the heart-strings that break,
I mock at the Hopes that are fled,
I swell the grim ranks of the dead,
The light of the wine-cup shall glow,
Its spell over mortals I'll throw,
Their shrouds shall yet burthen the loom,
I'll ring out the knell of their doom,
The spouse to the banquet I'll spread,
Shall come from his new marriage-bed,
The tresses of beauty shall twine
With serpents that lurk in the wine,
The life-blood of childhood shall drip
From cup that I'll press to the lip,
For place that Ambition would crave
I've marked out a desolate grave,



I'll change into creatures of Hate
Each vassal that guarded the State,
The monarch in vesture of Power,
Before me shall tremble and cower,



I'll snatch the pure gold all unwrought,
Deep hid in the minings of thought,
To blacken and burn in the fire
Enkindled by maddened desire,

I'll blot from the dial of time
The record of Manhood's rich prime,
Yea, wind the black fumes of the bowl
As cerements, to shroud the Lost Soul!"

What boast of a braggart in insolent pride
Can stay the on-sweeping of Victory's tide?
Resistless it rushes—it thunders from far
Like the cataract's fall, or the clamor of War;
Throughout the dark caverns its grand echoes ring
The wassail is ended—why paleth the King?
Shall billows the sway of the dread Tyrant own?
Ah, No! for engulfed are his sceptre and throne.
He sinks! he is lost in a fathomless grave,
No mortal to pity! no angel to save!

O Waters of Temperance! quench as ye flow
Each light that lures on to the dungeons of Woe,
And mirror as onward your surges ye roll
The Rainbow of Hope to the perishing soul!









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